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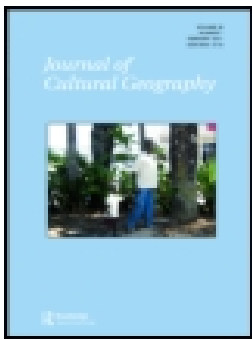
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## When transport becomes a destination: deaf spaces and networks on the Mumbai suburban trains

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### ABSTRACT

This article considers dense social interactions in commuter trains and their crucial role within city-wide networks. Literature on social interactions in public transport has focused on how commuters have short interactions with each other, or constitute groups of train friends, but without situating them in wider geographies. The article focuses on deaf people in the Mumbai metropolis who travel in compartments reserved for disabled people, chatting and exchanging news and information. These spatial practices are facilitated by the peninsular geography and train infrastructure of Mumbai. In order to produce deaf spaces, where deaf sociality and sign language use are the organizing principles, deaf people strategically board particular trains and particular compartments, and sometimes remain in the train beyond their original destination. Mobile phones are used to coordinate these meetings. The diversity of people meeting in the train is high, such as with regard to gender, age, religion, caste, class and divisions are either perpetuated or abated. Because these compartments provide a diverse range of deaf people a space for daily meetings on the way to and from their (mostly hearing) work places and families; they are very important spaces to maintain and expand networks in the wider Mumbai deaf community.

**KEYWORDS** Belonging; networks; infrastructure; disability; transport; mobilities

### Introduction

Ritesh: A hearing person [in the compartment for people with disabilities in the Mumbai trains] told me that he had observed deaf people signing intensively, noticing that they are not chatting with each other like hearing people do, but signing so much, all the way during the train trip and back. They are chatting so very much. I explained: Yes, at home, deaf people are bored, and when they are with other deafs, [...] they talk and laugh together and are enjoying this.

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- Sujit: For me the name of the compartment is not really “handicapped compartment”, I feel it’s really deaf’s own space, it’s ours.
- Harish: Yes that’s how it is. When the train comes I’m not excited right away but when I get inside I feel a big change! Like I’m walking on a dirty road and suddenly I see something beautiful at the end of the road. The train is also like that: at the outside it’s nothing but inside there’s something beautiful.

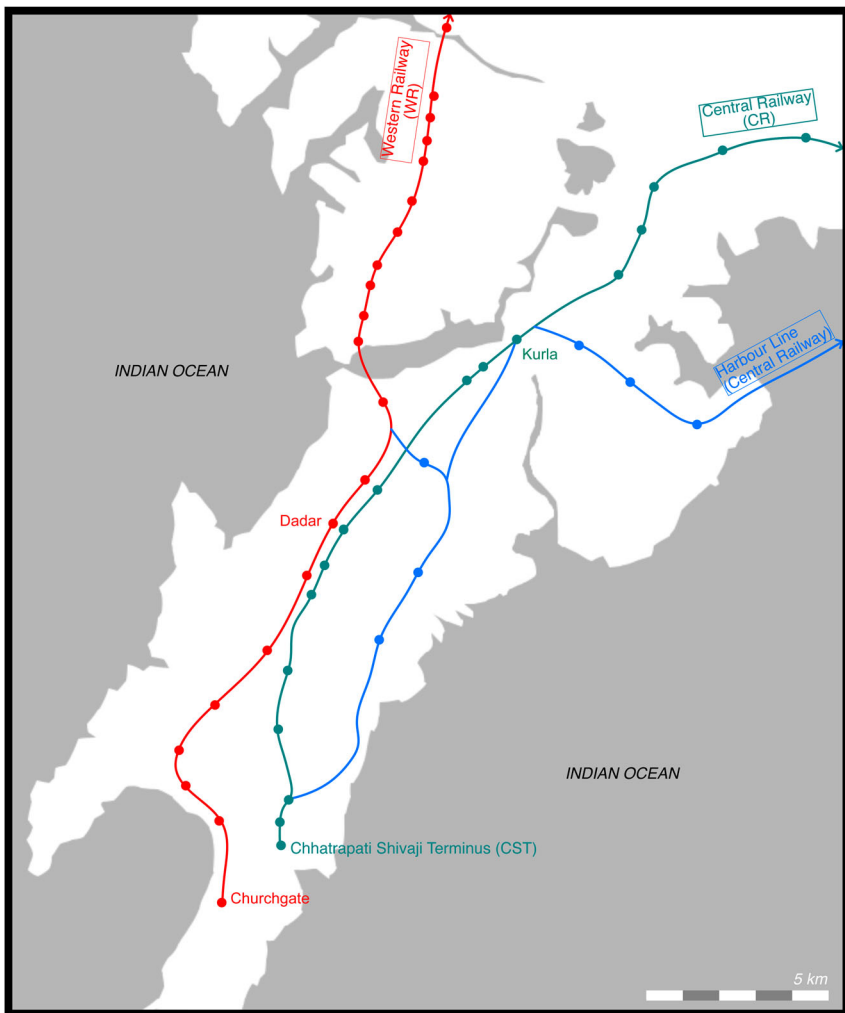
In these quotes, Ritesh, Sujit and Harish, three deaf men in their 20s and 30s, point out how important the deaf spaces in the Mumbai trains are to maintain social relationships and social networks within the Mumbai deaf community. This article focuses on how these networks are sustained and expanded during coordinated and uncoordinated train travel. Deaf people occupy certain areas in compartments reserved for people with disabilities (called “handicapped compartments” by the passengers), thus producing deaf spaces where sign language use and deaf sociality are the organizing principles.

It is significant that these deaf spaces are produced on/in what Ole B. Jensen has described as *armatures* (Jensen 2013), which are mobility lines and transit spaces such as streets, flight corridors and trains. In urban studies, more attention has been paid to *enclaves*, which are relatively bounded entities such as buildings, homes or squares (Jensen 2013). Jensen (2013) states that identities are constituted through mobile practices in networks that *transcend* enclaves. Indeed, he argues, there is a “potential of armatures to be appropriated by social agents creating alternative meanings, cultures and identities” (Jensen 2013, p. 141). Deaf commuters in Mumbai appropriate the armature to perform deaf sociality during their *everyday routes*, which confirms the enormous potential of the armature. Most deaf people work with hearing colleagues and after work, return to their (often extended) families with typically only or mostly hearing relatives. Meeting other deaf people on the train means they do not have to go to other places (enclaves) to meet each other after work and to communicate in sign language. In that respect, this study differs from social networks studies that suppose that people need to travel to a certain destination (enclave) in order to invest in face-to-face interactions to sustain their social networks. Instead, here, people network *during* their commute, in the form of collective and physical co-presence (rather than being networked during a commute with remote others via technology such as mobile phones).

Engaging in deaf sociality on the Mumbai trains is facilitated by the specific train infrastructure and by Mumbai’s geography. Mumbai is a peninsula, and the city’s central areas and business district are located in its southern tip. Therefore, many people commute daily from within the entire urban agglomeration to this small area, and the majority of these commuters do so by the suburban railway system, along two unidirectional north–south lines (rather

than a complex network with multiple intersections). These lines are called the Central Railways and the Western Railways, abbreviated to CR and WR from now on. (Note: the Harbor Line or HL is part of the CR; see [Figure 1](#)). The Mumbai suburban trains are referred to popularly as the lifeline or backbone of the city; and being the cheapest *and* fastest transport means in the city, they are the trains that “everyone” rides. There are between one and three compartments reserved for disabled people in each suburban train, and these have become centralized meeting places for deaf people.

In order to produce deaf spaces, or take part in deaf spaces, deaf people strategically board particular trains and particular handicapped compartments (HCs), coordinate and synchronize their routes by mobile phone,



**Figure 1.** Mumbai, its train lines and some of the larger stations.

and sometimes even remain in the train beyond their original destination: when their friends get off, they just take a train back. For deaf Mumbaikars, the train is thus a destination in its own right. By focusing on how train infrastructure, mobile phones and deaf spaces relate to each other, I am focusing on the underinvestigated connection between social networks, the material environment and technologies (including mobile phones), with(in) which they are networked (Urry 2004; Jensen 2013). I regard deaf networks (note the plural) in Mumbai as “hub networks”: relationships move through a number of hubs (Urry 2003), such as the trains and deaf clubs. Hub networks “come together in specific occasioned encounters as a *consequence* of diverse and complex forms of travel” (Urry 2003, p. 170, my emphasis), but in this case also *during* travel (i.e. on the armature).

In addition to armature spaces, deaf people in Mumbai also come together in enclaves. There are 22 schools for the deaf in Mumbai. Deaf people gather on weekends in the many clubs for the deaf in Mumbai, where they organize meetings, workshops and presentations. Deaf clubs and organizations also organize sports competitions and other large events, such as to celebrate religious festivals, International Women’s Day and World Deaf Day. There are also a large number of organizations and institutions that organize vocational training, soft skills training, computer courses, Indian Sign Language courses and English literacy training for deaf adults. Information about courses and events is shared in the train, and news and knowledge shared on the trains becomes common knowledge in the Mumbai deaf community. By regarding deaf sociality in the trains as part of wider deaf networks in the city, I connect interactions on the armature and in enclaves.

In this article, I am doing what Jensen (2009) calls “critical mobilities thinking”. Critical mobilities thinking is an approach with two key dimensions. The first is: “being critical about the taken-for-granted understanding of mobility [...] we have come to see that our lives are not just what happens in static enclaves, but also in all the interstices and the circulation in-between places” (Jensen 2009, pp. xvii–xviii). Part of critical mobilities thinking is acknowledging the potential of the armatures, as I am doing in this article with my focus on networking in trains. The second dimension of critical mobilities thinking is concerned with “a focus on the critical issues related to social phenomena like power, social exclusion, and mobile justices” (2009, p. xvii). The HCs are places where you see a large diversity of deaf people (particularly regarding age, religion, caste, education and gender) together in the same space. I look at how diverse deaf people not only connect; but also oppress, exclude and avoid each other in the HCs.

The article is based on ongoing research since 2007, when a first study on the Mumbai trains was undertaken, consisting of exploratory participant observation and two case studies (Kusters 2009). I am a white deaf woman from Belgium and have regularly travelled in the compartments since 2006

(including three years of continuous living in the city). My husband and in-laws are deaf Mumbaikars. During all those years, observations and conversations with regard to travelling in the suburban trains were laid down in field notes. In addition, 12 deaf people were interviewed in Indian Sign Language by myself and Sujit Sahasrabudhe, who was one of the participants in the 2007 study and became my husband and research assistant later on. The interviewed people had various backgrounds with regard to route of travel and destination, religion, age, caste, class and gender, and one of them was deaf-blind. In addition, in 2013 and 2014, discussions were organized in three local deaf clubs: India Deaf Society, mainly attended by deaf men of all ages; Yuva Association of the Deaf, a club for deaf youth (18–35 years); and Bombay Foundation of Deaf Women, attended by deaf women of all ages. The audience (50–100 attendees) were asked questions and whoever wanted to reply or comment took the stage, which led to lively discussions. In 2016, I also published a 15-minute video documentary about deaf spaces in the Mumbai trains (see <https://vimeo.com/172930705>).

### Travel time use and social interactions on public transport

A number of authors have investigated travel time use and pointed out that travel time is not necessarily empty, wasted or dead time, but can be used productively (for work), or used as transition time, time-out and/or time to relax (such as by reading, playing games, watching a movie, listening to music, sleeping, contemplating, looking out of the window) (Letherby and Reynolds 2005; Jain and Lyons 2008; Watts and Urry 2008; Bissell 2009). Such travel time use is often spent individually or socially networked (such as by using mobile phones and laptops to phone, e-mail, text). In common with the findings of these authors, many deaf Mumbaikars regard their train trips as a time to relax, but rather than using “travel remedy kits” (books, laptops, mobile phones) (Watts and Urry 2008), they fill their travel time with social interactions.

Authors who investigated social interactions in public transport described people letting others pass by, changing seats to give priority, helping with bags and strollers, and so on. There are (typically unspoken) guidelines and certain understandings of what behaviour is appropriate (Bissell 2009; Wilson 2011; Jensen 2013). People communicate mostly tacitly: head shakes, eye movements, body movements, gestures (Bissell 2009; Jensen 2013). Some authors have reported the occurrence of small talk with fellow passengers, jokes and exchange of information, often triggered by events (a problem with or within the vehicle, an accident on the street/tracks, baseball game day in the city) or by the presence of dogs or children (Letherby and Reynolds 2005; Soenen 2006; Bissell 2009; Wilson 2011; Swyngedouw 2013; Koefoed *et al.* 2016). Swyngedouw (2013) writes that people with the same ethnic background and/or interests and/or from the same neighbourhood are more likely

to interact. Soenen (2006), Butcher (2011), Wilson (2011), Ocejó and Tonnelat (2014) and Koefoed *et al.* (2016) describe how also intercultural interactions occur since urban public transport vehicles are confined spaces where diverse people travel together, where intercultural learning goes hand in hand with conflict, stereotyping, racism, intolerance and prejudices. Those analyses describe fleeting interactions, which contrast with the “thick co-presence” (meaning “intermittently rich, multi-layered and dense conversations”) described in this article (Urry 2003, p. 164).

There is a very small body of literature in which public transport vehicles are considered as important space to sustain or start friendships and social networks. Letherby and Reynolds (2005, p. 131) mention the existence of groups of train friends, which they defined as “people whom they have friendly relationships with on the train but never meet anywhere else”, discussing wide-ranging topics such as cars, politics, the economy and creating “a sort of family atmosphere on the train”. Coming closer to the deaf spaces in the HCs in terms of scale and dynamics, are Symes’ (2007) and Ocejó and Tonnelat’s (2014) ethnographies on student commuting on Sydney’s and New York’s suburban trains. In Sydney, these students from a number of different schools form “closed micro-communities” (Symes 2007, p. 443), a fluid ever-changing space in terms of who takes part, where students gather in groups, can be autonomous and feel free. Ocejó and Tonnelat (2014, p. 507) describe commuting teenagers in Queens as a vulnerable group who feel stronger together, and act out a youthful identity together: “it makes the ride ‘less boring’ and changes an otherwise uninteresting moment into a more social or ‘fun’ occasion. The students therefore experience the subway and being a rider differently when they ride with their friends”.

Another example similar in significance to deaf spaces in the Mumbai trains, are commuting women in the “ladies special” (trains reserved for women) and the ladies’ compartments in commuter trains in India. These are spaces where women can travel in more physical and mental comfort than in the male-dominated compartments; and which are documented as important female spaces in everyday life because at most women’s jobs, men are in charge, and at home they have to cook and care for their relatives and do the housekeeping. In the train, they can take time out, be themselves in all freedom and have an intensive social life that includes celebrating special occasions and advising and supporting each other in times of hardship (Tuli 2003; Phadke *et al.* 2011).

Some interesting parallels become apparent here: both the teenage students’ spaces and the women’s spaces are described as dynamic spaces where students/women change position frequently, and can be themselves away from the gaze of parents, teachers and men. This they have in common with deaf people who feel stronger together, and who feel they can sign freely. A difference though, is that deaf spaces in the Mumbai trains are tied into city-wide

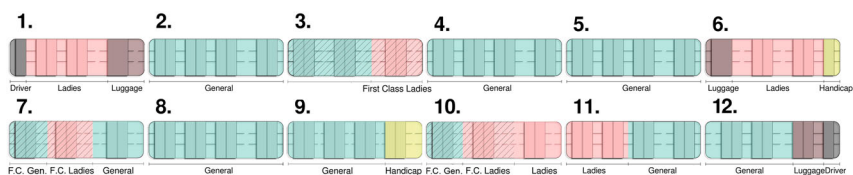


networks of deaf people, with deaf clubs, schools, courses, organizations and events. These deaf networks seem to be more expansive and complex than the student networks and women's networks as described by the abovementioned authors. They are reminiscent of Kleinman's (2014) research in the Gare du Nord train station in Paris where West African immigrants meet each other, pass on information about potential jobs and create ties outside of their kin and ethnic communities: "migrant groups create social worlds through infrastructural practice. They do so not principally by claiming a place as their own and transforming that space, but through the management of its connection to other sites and social relationships" (2014, p. 303).

### The Mumbai trains and deaf commuters' travel strategies

The Mumbai commuter trains run from 4 am to 1 am the following day at three-minute intervals during peak hours. There are "slow trains" which stop at every stop on the lines and "fast trains" which only stop in the larger stations. The morning peak runs from around 7–11 am and the evening peak from 4 to 9 pm. During peak times, a single commuter train carries up to 5000 commuters, most of whom are pressed against each other in "super-dense-crush loads", a term coined to describe the phenomenon of 14–16 passengers standing per square metre in the Mumbai trains. The doors can be closed but generally remain open in order to let air pass through the compartment and to smoothen the alighting/boarding process which starts when the train is still running. To negotiate entry to the Mumbai trains during peak times, during the intense shoving and drumming of the *dhakka mukki* (scruffle, or push-crush in Hindi and Marathi), who will alight/enter the compartment first (or whether they will enter/alight at all) depends on who is bravest, strongest and fastest.

The suburban trains contain the following compartments: general (the largest part of the train), general first class, ladies, ladies first class, luggage (for vendors with loads) and the HCs (Figure 2 and/or see the 15-minute documentary "Deaf spaces on Mumbai trains" at <https://vimeo.com/172930705>). These compartments make travel without sexual harassment possible for women and provide people with disabilities and people with



**Figure 2.** The order of compartments in a 12-car maroon old (as opposed to white-purple new) train in Mumbai.

loads with relatively more space to enter, alight and navigate the compartments. A symbol next to the door of the HC shows a wheelchair and a crab (indicating cancer). The HCs always stop at the same places at the platform, which are marked by signboards saying “Reserved for Handicapped” (Figure 3). The ticket to enter the HC is the same as for the rest of the second-class compartments but passengers need to carry a medical or disability certificate in addition. The majority of HC passengers, for example, have a deformed hand, a missing arm, leg or toe, have a disability located in their back or leg, are blind or have low vision, or are deaf. Given that, in developing countries, at least two out of every 1000 people are deaf, I estimate that there are at least 41,400 deaf people in Mumbai (which had 20.7 million inhabitants in 2016). Based on observation, it is safe to say that in every rush hour train, there are deaf people in the HCs.

Before 1993, there were no HCs, so deaf people travelled in the general compartments (GCs), and due to the *dhakka mukki* and super-dense-crush loads it was not possible to catch the train as a group, or form large deaf spaces in the train, or to have animated group-sized signed conversations. In contrast to the more normal “sign box” space described by Fekete (2017), Bilan, a deaf man in his 50s, narrates: “We were standing glued to each other, with our faces practically pressed against each other and signing really really small around our faces.” Deaf people often boarded the compartments that stopped closest to the bridges used to cross platforms (the foot over-bridges or FOBs) at the station of origin or destination. In 1993, some



**Figure 3.** Stairs to FOB and sign for HC waiting area on platform (top right).

driver's compartments located where carriages were joined were transformed into HCs, which measure only about 1.5 by 3 metres (Figure 4), and contain a bench with barely enough space for 5 people to sit (and I have counted up to 16 people standing there during rush hour).

Internationally, the category of disability has been rejected by many deaf people and within Deaf Studies, from the perspective that deaf people are a linguistic minority (Lane 2002). In Mumbai, the distinction is not made this strongly: deaf people partially identify as part of a wider disability community and use their disability certificate to prove they are entitled to travel in the HCs. Yet in emic discourses about the HCs they often sign about “handicapped” (or “hearing”) *versus* “deaf” people, the big difference being that “handicapped” people are not deaf (rather than that deaf people are not disabled!). Deaf and other disabled people co-exist, engage at times (see below), and there are also conflicts related to the use of space. Deaf people use a lot of space by signing; and since deaf people are not mobility-disabled, there are conflicts about deaf people's right to occupy seats within the compartment. This is thus an example of how disability is socially and interactionally constructed (see Kusters 2009, 2017).

When a critical mass of deaf people had learned that the HCs were places where they had the space to sign without being physically crushed by other travellers' bodies (see Kusters 2009), and the size of the HCs increased over time, the HCs became centralized places for deaf people to meet each other. Indeed, in addition to a small HC, a larger HC of about 5 by 3 metres was made available in 12-car trains which started to ride in addition to the older 9-car trains. Between 2002 and 2011, new trains were implemented, which are grey-white with a purple stripe (rather than maroon like the



**Figure 4.** Sign “Reserved for handicapped and cancer patients” on side of the train next to the door of the HC of an older small “HC”.

older trains), are better lit, more spacious, and there are two (in 12-cars trains) or three (in 15-cars trains) large HCs (about 6 or 7 by 3 metres) per train. These compartments contain six benches for two people (occupied by three when it is crowded), one long bench in the back where seven people can sit comfortably, and ample standing space (with handholds on the ceiling) (Figure 5). When it is very crowded, up to 30 people sit on the benches (designed for 19 people) and many more people stand.

In trains with *one small and one large HC* (the older 12-car trains), deaf people preferred to board the large HC. In newer trains with *two large HCs*, deaf people typically board the HC next to the ladies compartment (LC). (The other HC adjoins the GCs. Several reasons were given for this: a number of deaf men said it was because of being able to watch the women through the steel bars (or a window in the steel wall) separating the HC and LC sections (Figure 6). Other reasons were that the HC next to the LC stopped closer to the exits and FOBs (Figure 3) in most stations, and that the HC next to the LC was already the large one in the older 12-car trains (which had a small and large HC) and thus deaf people were already habitually travelling in this compartment. On some occasions, deaf people boarded the other HC (adjoining the GC) or even the GC or luggage compartments: (1) if they were better located towards the FOB *and* if travelling only a short distance, (2) when wanting to avoid deaf people (discussed below) or (3) when a larger deaf group wanted to board an older 9-car train with only a small HC, particularly during non-rush hours. There is also a third HC in the new 15-cars trains which run on specific times only, which were less crowded but distances from the FOB were larger and there was a smaller chance of meeting deaf people. Harish explained: “I feel the third



**Figure 5.** Compartment in a white-purple train during non-rush hour.



**Figure 6.** Separation between LC and HC.

one is 'light', like there is nothing, something is missing." The availability of space was thus not an argument strong enough to travel in this compartment, compared to the potential to travel in deaf spaces.

Throughout the years, there has been a change in deaf women's travel patterns. GCs are for both genders but male-dominated, LCs are for women (and children from both genders) and HCs are mixed in gender. Many deaf women found the small HCs uncomfortable due to the proximity of male bodies (and many of them had experienced harassment there). The increasing size of the HCs led to an increase in the number of deaf women travelling in the HCs. Deaf women are less likely to travel in the HC that is not next to the LC, for the reasons described above, but also because it does not enable them to decide last minute whether to board the LC or the HC. In the past (2007), a mixed group of deaf women and men sometimes split along gender lines when boarding, between a small (or larger but crowded) HC and a LC, and sometimes they interacted through the bars (or window in the wall) between the compartments. However, that happened only occasionally in 2016: I observed that deaf women boarded the HC much more often than in 2007 when I started doing research in the trains.

The designated waiting areas on the platforms (featuring the signboards such as in [Figure 3](#)) have several functions in the production of deaf spaces. For example, sometimes deaf people on the platform will check who is in the HC and then decide whether to board or wait for the next train. Also, deaf people on the platform, who aim to catch a later train (with more/fewer stops) exchange greetings or information with deaf passengers through the train door or window ([Figure 7](#)). Deaf people sometimes also communicate across platforms ([Figure 8](#)).





**Figure 7.** Deaf man talking through the window with deaf passenger in the train.

Furthermore, deaf spaces emerge at the two main stations in the tip of the peninsula (CST and CC in [Figure 1](#)), at stations where train lines intersect (such as Dadar and Kurla) and at some other stations, mainly in the evenings. Deaf people might let a number of trains pass before catching one, or deaf people chat for a while at their home station before heading homewards. Also after gatherings at deaf enclaves (such as club gatherings or deaf schools), groups of deaf people are seen chatting at the platforms, and boarding trains in groups.

In 2007, mobile phones were increasingly in use by deaf commuters; and in 2015, smart phones were a common sight in the HC. Mobile phones are used for scheduling meetings, for example, by letting someone know which HC you are in. If two friends are travelling on different running trains, the one travelling on the earlier of the two may get off to join their friend in the later train.



**Figure 8.** Two deaf men (see ovals) chatting across platforms near the “handicapped” signs (see squares).

## Deaf spaces in the HCs

In the CST station, in the tip of the peninsula (refer again to [Figure 1](#)), the train starts empty and the HC is accessed a long way down the platform. Sujit narrates an anecdote:

I was at CST with my [deaf] father, I first wanted coffee and bought it and ran on the platform with that coffee in my hand. My father asked me: “What are you doing?! You can get in right here [i.e. the GC]!” I said: “No, no!”, and ran for the HC, as you know the HC is really far in the CST, so I ran and ran with that coffee. It was funny as there were no people in the GCs but I didn’t mind, I ran for the HC with that coffee, and I was so relieved when I sat down. [...] I feel the HC is ours, for deaf people to sit, [...] I feel connected there, when I go there I feel relaxed. I feel it is our deaf place.

Even when it is empty, getting in the HC was experienced as checking into the deaf network, into a space of potential, since deaf people can join in the stops after CST (like an empty family house where you know that people will arrive home any time). The quote above also suggests that the attachment to the HC might be age-related: Sujit’s deaf father was in his late 60s and had lived in Mumbai all his life, habitually caught the GC when he was younger and did not have the urgency Sujit felt to the board the HC: instead the father’s preference was to make a pragmatic choice. He actually regularly travels in the HC, just like other people from his generation, but still regards the GC as a feasible option when the train is not crowded.

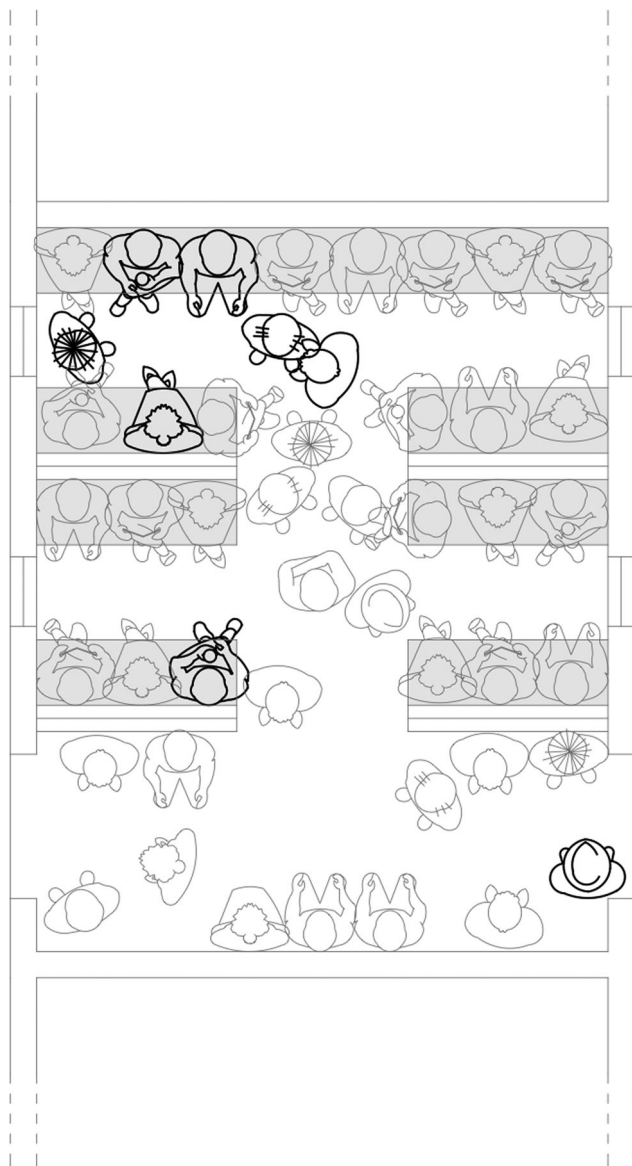
In the morning, there are deaf people who commute long distances (1–2 hours) together in groups of train friends, starting at a destination north of Mumbai, descending into the peninsula, and the groups grow when deaf people join at the subsequent stops, and again get smaller after Dadar, a central link station (see [Figure 1](#)). In the evening, the passenger body varies more strongly (people finish work at different times, including working overtime). Deaf people typically feel more connected to the line (i.e. WR or CR) they travel more often and know more passengers on this line.

Travelling together in a space otherwise dominated by hearing people often leads to support and fraternizing. Harish commented:

... in the [deaf] clubs and so on, people criticize each other harshly, but in the train people say: “Come, come here”. They keep and manage the space [i.e. seats] for deaf people. So deaf people criticize each other but still they travel in group. So where hearing people can oppress us, we are one front, but in the clubs there’s trouble and mutual oppression. So people who really have troubles with each other, they help each other in the train. Wow. That makes me think!

It is, however, not the case that deaf people who travel in HCs always sit together and create one deaf space encompassing all deaf people who are present in the compartment at that moment in time. Deaf people might be

scattered (in pairs, in small groups, or individually) throughout the compartment. When travelling in group in a moderately to severely crowded compartment, deaf people prefer to sit and stand in one of the back corners and on the long back bench (such as in [Figures 9](#) and [10](#)), explaining that this is because there are fewer interruptions in conversations, more space for bantering and



**Figure 9.** Birds-eye view drawing of the inside of a new HC.

Note: The people in black outlines represent deaf people.





**Figure 10.** (a) and (b) Deaf spaces in the back of a compartment, both taken during the same trip to illustrate that people change positions frequently. The white woman is the author.

playful behaviour, and they have a better view of what happens in the compartment (such as people entering). Deaf spaces in the HCs are often not round/oval/square/semi-circle as is often the case in teaching situations, meetings or restaurant visits, for examples, but are typically more chaotic. Some people may sit whilst other people stand around and between their benches, and people change position often, such as when switching seats with friends or when passengers in their environment occupy or vacate seats or standing space (see [Figure 10](#), and film “Deaf spaces on Mumbai trains”). When the compartment is (almost) empty, deaf people often disperse themselves over a larger space in the compartment. Thus deaf people adapt their use of space to the material environment and the amount of crowdedness in the

immediate environment whilst at the same time trying to reach optimal visibility of, and thus access to, signed conversations (Figure 10).

Deaf research participants explained that participating in a deaf space makes them totally absorbed in the “deaf bubble” that is created and renders the other passengers invisible. Harish signed:

I wait for the train, then the train is coming, and the [handicapped compartment with its] wheelchair-symbol stops in front of me, and I see deaf people waving: “Come! Sit here! Fast, fast!” I run and jump in the train to occupy the seat it’s ours, we sign and I feel relaxed to be with deaf-ours. Then I don’t feel like I am in the handicapped compartment [...] It happens automatically that I do not really see the blind people, the people without legs and so on, I just do not see them, [...] I’m just not thinking about them when I’m commuting as a deaf person.

A deaf space thus can be a bubble, a room without walls, in which people selectively filter out the environment. Vertovec (2015, p. 16) employed the phrase “rooms without walls” to describe how in urban public spaces, temporary and transient formations of individuals

tend to socially cluster inside smaller, “carved-out” spaces within these large ones. Based on a variety of possible emergent affinities, such groups sometimes collectively behave as if the larger space was not there; they are effectively in their own “room”. [...] [T]here are often social [...] and spatial boundaries to be made, marked and maintained; and usually some “rules of conduct” arise, come into play and are sanctioned and may become formalized.

These rooms without walls are permeable: the compartments are spaces of regular and routinized encounters with people with other disabilities. Many disabled hearing people knew some Indian Sign Language or they communicated fluently through gestures, but there were also conflicts about rules of conduct and the occupation of seats, which I have described elsewhere (Kusters 2017).

Deaf conversations can last a long time but they also can be short, such as when a person gets off after a few stops, or when people are not acquainted or do not have many shared interests. Often it is enough to acknowledge each other’s presence, by nodding to the other and/or greeting, which includes inquiring after each other’s (families’) well-being. By greeting, deaf people maintain and consolidate the networks they take part in. Mona, a deaf woman in her 30s, commented: “Greeting is important even when someone is asleep! They might be woken up for the greeting.” This also happens through mobile phones if a group of deaf people is travelling in the HC and one person video-calls another deaf person, sometimes the phone goes round in the HC for other deaf people to greet. The train is thus a place where weak ties (which are crucial for linking networks, providing bridges and connecting people) are reinforced continuously (Granovetter 1973) (see Kusters 2009).

New (weak) ties are created in the HCs too. Deaf people often can recognize a fellow traveller as deaf even when they are travelling individually and not signing: deaf people typically do not have a visible physical disability (unless they wear hearing aids), and there is a distinctly deaf way of looking around (more often, more alert/intense, in more directions). Some deaf travellers even use their mobile phones in order to initiate or elicit contacts with fellow deaf travellers: making fake video-calls, or sms-ing very obviously and signing something to themselves, such as: “problem”, hoping that the unfamiliar deaf person will initiate contact. In short, deaf people create *encounterability*, they “create geographies of opportunity to be seen and encounter others” (comparable to people sitting in front of their houses, hoping that passersby will talk with them) (Hodgson 2011, p. 58).

### The HC as a space of learning and connecting

Deaf people presented the HC as a space of learning, as alternative to their relatives at home, with whom communication is often limited (see Friedner 2015 for a discussion how and why Indian deaf people orient away from their family towards the deaf community). In Deaf Studies, values shared in deaf communities have often been described as strongly collectivist (Ladd 2003). In the context of urban India, Friedner (2015) highlighted how deaf encounters in diverse spaces such as churches, NGOs and vocational courses for deaf people are important for sharing knowledge on “how to develop”; in the sense of professional development but also in the sense of learning sign language, and learning about the deaf community and its values. Similarly, within deaf spaces in the Mumbai trains, topics of conversations include themes that are related to life in general, and to deaf issues in particular. Deaf events are evaluated, and themes such as politics within deaf associations and organizations, and benefits for deaf people are discussed. The HCs are also places where deaf people who recently moved in from outside of Mumbai, and deaf youth who are in a transitional phase to adulthood, have direct and daily access to deaf networks and the information that is circulated there, in contrast to “vanishing” in a large crowd during deaf events which attract hundreds of people. In the trains, deaf people learn about clubs and events, sell/buy tickets, convince each other to join English literacy courses or a deaf church group, for examples. The trains as mobile spaces (armatures) are thus important in recruiting people for gatherings at static places (enclaves). Also, as mentioned above, people take the train in groups after events in enclaves.

In addition to issues related to deaf networks, a lot of other themes are discussed. Many conversations are about jobs: how to get a permanent job, how to behave during a job interview, how to solve problems on the job. Other topics include food and health, (arranged) marriages and matrimonial

programmes, sports and political news, the weather, the prices of homes and other life expenses, new technology (smartphones, bikes, cars) and problems with the train. These themes were discussed between deaf and the other disabled passengers too. In addition to exchanging information, deaf people seek translation of flyers and mobile phone messages (including information about deaf events) from English, Hindi or Marathi into Indian Sign Language, from others who are literate in those languages.

Furthermore, the train is presented as a place where gossip is spread, but simultaneously a place where gossip and rumours dissolve and stories are clarified, and where you can get to know certain people directly without holding prejudices, since there often is the space and time to communicate at length and at ease. There is the opportunity to confront people directly, including people whom one does not know well; and to approach deaf leaders who are active in boards or staff of deaf clubs/associations/organizations. In the trains the threshold to approach leaders with questions is lower than elsewhere, and they typically have more time in the trains than during gatherings in enclaves. Bilan, for example, explained rumours about corruption in a deaf cricket group to a certain deaf person he met in the train, who was reluctant to join this group due to what he had learnt. Afterwards this person joined the group after all.

Information and news shared on the train travels farther. Knowing who regularly travels together, deaf people ask other deaf people to pass on information to their deaf co-passengers. Even though it is not allowed, the walls of the compartment are occasionally used to spread information too, such as posters about deaf performance shows or pamphlets warning about criminal deaf individuals who had abused women or stolen money. Even though the pictures were removed from the train walls shortly thereafter, a critical mass of people had seen them and the word had been spread. Deaf commuters pass on information to other deaf people they meet, such as on other trains or via Whatsapp and videocall. This information includes not only stories told *during* travel but also stories *about* travel, since the HC's are home to a high number of conflicts (see Kusters 2017). Thus, train knowledge becomes common knowledge in the Mumbai deaf networks, and the other way around.

### Encounters of diversity

In line with Jensen's "critical mobilities thinking", I have engaged with the armature as space of potential. Yet in addition to "potential thinking" (Jensen 2013, p. 195), critical mobilities thinking focuses on inequalities within mobilities. The HCs are travelled in by deaf people of different backgrounds as regards gender, age, religion and caste, socio-economic class, education and origin. A number of deaf people from very rich or very poor families did not travel by train, but passengers were definitely not limited

to the middle class. As a result, the HCs are places where different variants of Indian Sign Language are used, and these signs are mutually exchanged and learned. For example, Tushar, a middle-aged man signed: "The HC makes a bridge between young and old signs", referring to older versus newer variants. There also are different school-related variants (including differences in fingerspelling scripts, and some variants include signs from American Sign Language). I have not seen deaf foreigners (other than myself) travelling regularly in the HC, but there are many deaf people coming from other areas in India who bring their own variants and learn Mumbai-based variants. Sana (a deaf woman in her late twenties) commented: "People come to Mumbai for work, to live here. They sign differently, such as this sign [produces South-Indian sign for question words], [...] I learn by seeing these signs, it is interesting, I develop knowledge." Deaf and hard of hearing people who do not sign sometimes travel in the HC, and might or might not engage with deaf signers, however, when such individuals do not identify themselves, their presence might go unnoticed.

Age- and education-related differences were the most discussed ones during the interviews and in the deaf clubs, rather than differences of religion, caste, class or origin, for example. Sometimes there are long intergenerational conversations in the HC whilst other times, people keep to their peers after the obligatory greetings. Young deaf people's interests and conversation themes changed more often than older people's, and some young deaf people felt that older deaf people looked down on them, treated them as ignorant, and criticized them too much. Others emphasized they learned a lot from older deaf people and their experiential knowledge (such as about marriage, financial management and problem solving); directly in conversations with them, or indirectly by observing their conversations. Older deaf people expressed they felt responsible for passing on such experiential knowledge to younger deaf people, one man said: "If we not teach, we die without having passed on our knowledge to them. Where can young deaf people learn?"

On the other hand, younger deaf people have generally completed a higher level of education. Deaf commuters included those who had not gone to school or who had attended for only a few years, and those who completed Indian Sign Language teacher courses, English literacy courses or (to a lesser extent) college and university degrees. The latter often were more aware and confident regarding sign language use and deaf-related (political) issues. It was said that these courses and this knowledge made deaf people either arrogant (or perceived as arrogant) or more open and understanding towards diversity in the deaf community.

Occasionally, groups of unaccompanied deaf schoolchildren travel together. Since schools require them to, they typically wear hearing aids (in contrast to the majority of deaf adults) and school uniforms, and mostly interact with each other and occasionally with deaf adults. Younger deaf children

are usually accompanied by their (mostly hearing) parents, who are allowed to escort them. Short interactions between deaf adults and younger children included pinching cheeks and joking or teasing, and talking a bit, passing on life advice to children (such as: learn well at school, do not copy during exams, do not talk back to your mother). Having been misinformed by professionals that sign language use delays speech development, parents often prevent their children from interacting with deaf adults through sign language (by ordering the children to speak, by beating them or by taking them to another spot in the HC). Deaf adults expressed concern and regret over these parents' reluctance since they saw that the children were curious and delighted to sign with deaf adults. Deaf adults are important role models, especially as many deaf children do not see deaf adults in their families and schools. However, even when not interacting much with deaf adults, deaf children travelling in the HC can observe on a daily basis that deaf adults exist, communicate fluently with each other, have friends and jobs, travel independently, are visible and confidently use sign language in public. Sometimes the situation improved when travelling a route together repeatedly and deaf adults built up acquaintance with hearing parents.

Gender plays a role in the HC too: in the deaf women's club it was said that some deaf men do not allow their wives to talk with other deaf men, being overprotective and wanting to prevent adultery. The HCs are male-dominated, and deaf women have diverse travel strategies: they travel in either the LC or HC, assessing where they will feel more comfortable and less likely to be harassed or assaulted, depending on the level of crowdedness, the time of the day and the presence of friends. Deaf *hijras* (transgender people) reported ridicule and harassment by deaf men who touched zones such as their hips, belly or breasts. Rahim, a deaf *hijra*, narrated how a deaf person told her she should not travel on the CR, "because they [deaf] will be embarrassed. We are DEAF-SAME, so I was surprised they said that. I don't understand. I said: The railway is not yours, neither mine". There is thus a tension between the HC as a diverse space and deaf people claiming ownership over it and deciding who does or does not belong. Similarly, Phadke *et al.* (2011) write that in the LCs, there are arguments, tensions and hostility, and the direct or indirect exclusion of women who do not look indisputably female or feminine, such as *hijras* and (lesbian) women who dress androgynously or ambiguously.

There are of course other minorities such as deaf blind and deaf disabled people. I have not seen the latter regularly, unless they had a minor disability that did not limit them from travelling in the trains. One of the interviewees was a deaf blind man, who regularly travelled in the HC, but also travelled in the general first class or even the LCs, depending on level of crowdedness (if it was too crowded in the HC he boarded the first class) or emptiness (in compartments with few people he found it more difficult to acquire information or



assistance from fellow travellers). Intersections of deafness with gender, age and blindness could thus mean that people were less strongly tied to the HC. For them, being deaf does not always “trump” other statuses. But as discussed in the next section, that is also the case for deaf people in general.

### ***Social disengagement***

Deaf spaces were not only actively produced and sought after, but also actively avoided, for example, because of a dislike of conversation themes, such as gossip, “dirty talk” about sex, jokes at the expense of others, malicious/unproductive talk about politics in deaf clubs and endless talk about problems in jobs. Other reasons to withdraw were being tired and/or not being in the mood for talking (for example, because of having talked with deaf people at their jobs all day. Furthermore, naturally there were people who disliked particular other people, or felt that they had not enough common ground in order to engage at length.

One strategy to avoid deaf spaces is to travel in the less-well attended HCs (the ones not next to the LC), in a first class compartment, or (for women) the LC. Another strategy is avoiding a particular train that is usually packed with deaf people (such as during the morning commute), by catching an earlier or later train or by catching a slow rather than fast train (since it is commonly known that more deaf people travel in the fast trains). When already being in a compartment and wanting to escape a particular conversation, an option is leaving the train and catching the next one, or for women: leaving the HC and boarding in the adjoining LC in a subsequent station.

Within the compartment, one strategy is for deaf people to keep aloof, avoiding eye contact, hoping that people do not address them; or greet people in a distant and restricted way, asking if the other person and their family are fine and then looking away. In conversations that do not interest them, people sometimes respond in passive ways (merely nodding or wobbling the head), or even explicitly tell the other person not to sign.

Other strategies include pretending to be asleep, being busy with a mobile phone or smartphone, or video-calling with other people; behaviour which was critiqued by many deaf people. Kim (2012) called such social disengagement “nonsocial transient behaviour”. Sujit usually reads a book or newspaper (sometimes interpreted as a sign of arrogance since many deaf people have only basic functional literacy), unless there is no space for reading, then he joins in the conversation. Harish said he likes to hang out of the doorway if he did not feel like talking with deaf people or when it is too crowded inside, which was criticized by deaf people who found this an asocial practice. Crowds in the HCs thus can play a role in driving deaf people towards each other but also separate them. However, once again, the understanding is that deaf people at least have to greet each other before socially disengaging. There

were huge individual differences in social disengagement, too. Sana, for example, values patient behaviour in situations where deaf people pour their hearts out:

I look at the person, otherwise I would hurt their feelings [...]. You need to show each other your face. [...] Because for this deaf person it is difficult in the [hearing] social environment to communicate with people, so they feel lonely, that's why they talk so much when meeting, they have to get it out. I have experienced the same.

## Conclusion

In *Staging mobilities*, Jensen (2013, p. 5) understands mobilities as being carefully and meticulously staged, designed, orchestrated and planned “from above”, by which he means planning, design and regulation by institutions. In Mumbai, deaf people's movements are planned from above in that they follow train schedules and use existing infrastructure (i.e. HCs). At the same time, and equally important, mobilities are staged, performed and lived “from below”: deaf people board particular trains (small or fast, particular times) or HCs depending on time of the day (rush hour or not), the destination (next stop or a further destination), distance from FOB at origin/destination, and wanting to meet or rather avoid (particular) deaf people. There is a combination of punctuality through clock-time (the train schedules) and fluid coordination through mobile phones. In this case, telecommunication is complementary with physical travels (Mokhtarian 2003). Mobile phones are used to coordinate meetings in the trains and stations (thus in armatures), and to spread information on events (in enclaves) which are typically travelled to by train, and further discussed in the trains.

Pointing at the potential of the armature, Jensen (2013, p. 23) states that “We make sense of the world and our consociates as we move and thus also produce meaning, culture and norms as we interact in motion.” The interaction in motion Jensen writes about is a Goffmanesque description of passenger knowledge and mobile choreography, rather than rich and dense social interactions such as those in the deaf spaces in the Mumbai trains. Deaf spaces in the trains are places where deaf people sign and engage in deaf sociality, relax and time out, learn and exchange knowledge, and negotiate the diversity of deaf travellers in enabling and oppressing ways. The HCs are hubs in wider deaf networks where other hubs include other deaf landmarks in Mumbai. Train meetings thus nurture the deaf spaces in enclaves by encouraging more sociality; however, it also could be that people who have daily chats in the trains, feel less the urge to attend weekly deaf club events.

Urry (2003) states that the degree of *meetingness* (how often the network meets up and what information is exchanged) is crucial to cement connections within networks. On the trains, deaf people meet during their daily



routes without the “mobility burden” (Urry 2004) of having to travel elsewhere (such as to clubs) to sustain networks. There is face-to-face “thick co-presence” *while* travelling, and meetings during travel further extend the weak ties within the Mumbai deaf community networks. By portraying these processes, I have engaged in critical mobilities thinking, to which it is key “to include both the ‘dark sides’ of mobilities and ‘potential thinking’” Jensen (2013, p. 41). By dark sides he means marginalization, segregation, exclusion and by “potential thinking”, that mobilities “may carry potentials for new types of practices, cultures and forms of interactions that may provide people with new and positive experiences” (Jensen 2013, p. 192).

I have learnt about multiple locations in multiple countries where deaf commuters meet at public transport or stations. However, in Mumbai, there is a powerful and fertile combination of its peninsular geography and its two unidirectional train lines with the fact that trains are the fastest and cheapest transport means into the city and their provision of reserved compartments for disabled people. Before the HCs existed, the Mumbai trains were not extensively used to produce deaf spaces. And in Delhi and Kolkata, for example, where commuter trains also have HCs, their geographies are different and a wider variety of other means of transport are used. The Mumbai trains have become central meeting places for deaf Mumbaikars because in this specific instance of “staging mobilities” from above and from below, networked deaf spaces flourish.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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